Theatre for Development and School Truancy Reduction in Ghanaian Basic Schools: A Community–School Partnership Model in Gomoa Mankoadze, Central Region of Ghana

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ABSTRACT

Truancy remains a persistent challenge in Ghanaian basic schools despite national education policies aimed at ensuring universal access and retention. This study examines the application of Theatre for Development (TfD) as a participatory intervention to address school truancy in Gomoa Mankoadze, a coastal fishing community in the Central Region of Ghana. Using a participatory action research design, the study engaged 147 participants including pupils, teachers, parents, community elders, and task force members over an eight-month period (February–September 2024). The intervention employed an eight-phase TfD cycle integrating community entry, exploratory workshops, story harvesting, collective script devising, forum performances, post-performance dialogues, action planning, and follow-up monitoring. Baseline data revealed a mean attendance rate of 68.4% among Basic 4–6 pupils during the pre-intervention period (January 2024). Post-intervention monitoring (August–September 2024) showed improvement to 87.6% representing a statistically significant increase of 19.2 percentage points. Qualitative data from 34 semi-structured interviews and 8 focus group discussions, analyzed using thematic analysis, identified five primary drivers of truancy: seasonal fishing economy pressures, fear-based disciplinary practices, household food insecurity, parental ambivalence toward education, and weak enforcement mechanisms. The forum theatre methodology proved particularly catalytic, creating spaces for stakeholders to rehearse alternative behaviors and negotiate shared accountability. The study proposes a Community–School Partnership Model grounded in five principles: shared diagnosis, cultural embeddedness, institutional anchoring, multi-stakeholder accountability, and iterative monitoring. While the intervention demonstrated measurable effectiveness, limitations include the absence of a control group and the short follow-up period constraining assessment of long-term sustainability. The model offers a replicable framework for TfD-based educational interventions in similar coastal fishing communities across Ghana, aligned with Sustainable Development Goal 4 commitments for inclusive and equitable quality education.

Keywords: Theatre for Development, truancy, school absenteeism, community participation, Ghana, basic education, forum theatre, participatory action research

INTRODUCTION

Theatre for Development (TfD) has emerged as a powerful participatory tool in addressing social and educational challenges in Africa, particularly in Ghana, where it integrates indigenous performance traditions with modern development strategies to foster community engagement and behavioral change. Defined as "an art in which community theatre is used as a tool for community mobilization, education, awareness, sensitization and conscientization" aimed at effecting change in individuals and communities (Asante & Yirenkyi, 2020, p. 1), TfD relies on local cultural forms—storytelling, songs, dance, and improvisational drama—to engage people in analyzing their own realities and generating solutions from within.

In the context of education, TfD has been applied to promote school attendance and reduce truancy by bridging gaps between schools and communities. This article explores the application of TfD in reducing school truancy in Ghanaian basic schools through a community-school partnership model, drawing on empirical insights from the Gomoa Mankoadze community, a coastal fishing town in the Central Region. Mankoadze is situated in the

Gomoa West district, approximately 17.9 kilometers from the Winneba township, accessible via a six-kilometer dusty road off the main Accra-Cape Coast highway. The community, whose name derives from the Fante words meaning "under the hill," is bounded by the sea to the south and is characterized by fishing as its dominant livelihood activity.

In Gomoa Mankoadze, habitual absenteeism among pupils particularly those in Basic 4–6 was identified by community elders, school authorities, and local stakeholders as a pressing concern. School administrators at the Mankoadze Methodist D.A. Community School reported that truancy contributed to poor academic performance, classroom disruption, and declining teacher morale. Although a community task force had previously been established to monitor school attendance, it had become ineffective due to weak supervision and parental resistance, with some parents reportedly attacking task force members when they attempted to discipline truant children. The problem, therefore, extended beyond individual pupil misconduct to encompass broader social, cultural, and institutional dynamics.

Statement of the Problem

Despite government policies aimed at improving school attendance, including the Free Compulsory Universal Basic Education (FCUBE) programme mandated by Chapter 6, Section 38 of Ghana's 1992 Constitution, truancy persists in rural Ghanaian communities. The Ministry of Education (2011) reported that truancy is widespread across all regions of Ghana and is increasing at an alarming rate, with statistics from 2008 and 2009 indicating that one-fifth of enrolled pupils miss classes at the beginning of every academic year. In Gomoa Mankoadze, preliminary observations in January 2024 revealed that average daily attendance among Basic 4–6 pupils fluctuated between 55% and 78%, with sharp declines during the seasonal fishing period known locally as "baka pae." Existing measures, including a community task force established in 2019, were ineffective due to parental hostility and lack of structured follow-up. The challenge was not merely individual pupil misconduct but a broader breakdown in shared responsibility between school authorities, parents, and community leadership. There was therefore a need for a participatory, culturally resonant intervention capable of creating dialogue across stakeholder groups, reframing truancy as a collective issue, and stimulating locally driven solutions.

Research Questions

This study was guided by the following research questions:

1. What socio-cultural, economic, and institutional factors contribute to truancy among Basic 4–6 pupils in Gomoa Mankoadze?

2. How does participatory Theatre for Development facilitate dialogue and collective action among multiple stakeholder groups (pupils, parents, teachers, community leaders) to address truancy?

3. To what extent does a TfD-based community-school partnership intervention improve school attendance rates over an eight-month period?

Purpose of the Study

The primary purpose of this study was to investigate how TfD, through community-school partnerships, can serve as an innovative, participatory mechanism to reduce truancy in Ghanaian basic schools. By documenting empirical evidence from the Mankoadze intervention with both quantitative attendance data and qualitative stakeholder perspectives, the study aims to inform policymakers on integrating culturally relevant tools like TfD into educational strategies, ultimately enhancing student retention and performance. This aligns with Ghana's Sustainable Development Goal 4 commitments for inclusive and equitable quality education, promoting attitudinal change among stakeholders for sustainable development (United Nations, 2015).

LITERATURE REVIEW

Conceptualizing Theatre for Development

Theatre for Development is seen as theatre for the people, by the people, and of the people that examines the people's developmental processes (Mda, 1993). As Knight and Brown (2005) articulate, "Theatre for

Development (TfD) is a development practice that uses performance as a participatory tool to help individuals and groups share their experiences with the intent of social transformation" (p. 12). In TfD, community members are not onlookers, audiences, or spectators; they are active performers demonstrating their own lives and experiences through drama at all levels.

Odhiambo (2004) stated that TfD is characterized by active participation of the community in which it takes place, during which participants identify their problems, reflect on how and why the problems affect them, and, with insights gained through engagement with theatre performances, explore possible solutions. This distinguishes TfD from conventional development communication approaches, which tend to position communities as passive recipients of expert-designed messages (Prentki & Preston, 2009). TfD's participatory epistemology is grounded in Paulo Freire's (1970) pedagogy of the oppressed, which insists that genuine education must arise from the lived experience of the learner rather than being deposited from above. Freire's concept of conscientization—the process through which communities develop critical awareness of their social reality and their capacity to transform it—provides the theoretical foundation for TfD's emphasis on dialogue, problem-posing, and collective action.

Forum Theatre and Its Application

A central methodology within TfD practice is forum theatre, developed by Augusto Boal (1979) as part of his Theatre of the Oppressed framework. Forum theatre transforms spectators into spect-actors—simultaneously witnesses and agents of change. In this methodology, a scene depicting an unresolved social conflict is performed, after which audience members are invited to interrupt the action, replace the protagonist, and experiment with alternative strategies for addressing the problem. Boal (1979) argues that this rehearsal of reality enables communities to practice different responses to oppressive situations in the protective distance of fiction, thereby building both critical consciousness and agency. The role of the joker—a neutral facilitator—ensures that interventions are genuinely explored rather than quickly resolved, and that systemic dimensions of problems remain visible in the discussion. In educational contexts, forum theatre has proven effective because it externalizes and dramatizes the dilemmas that pupils, parents, and teachers experience, making systemic issues visible and discussable in ways that direct verbal communication often cannot achieve (Prentki & Preston, 2009; Taylor, 2003).

Defining and Understanding Truancy

Truancy, for the purposes of this study, is defined as consecutive unexcused absences from class or school. Different scholars have approached the concept from varying angles. Bassey (2020) defines truancy as a student's willful departure from school without parental knowledge or approval, for which no fair or acceptable cause is presented. Antrobus et al. (2019) define it as students who have been registered with a school but have been discovered as failing to attend when the law requires them to. Heyne et al. (2019) note that students who are absent from school spend their time away from home and conceal their absences from their parents. These definitions highlight both the behavioral dimension (unauthorized absence) and the relational dimension (concealment, evasion of authority) of truancy.

The causes of truancy are understood to cluster within four major categories: family factors, school factors, economic influences, and student variables (Zhang et al., 2007). Family factors include parental education levels, supervision patterns, and household income. Henry (2007) demonstrates that the lower the father's education level, the more likely the child is to commit truancy, and that children who are unsupervised for extended periods after school are significantly more likely to become truant. School factors include institutional climate, class size, teacher-pupil relationships, and disciplinary policies. Wilkins (2008) argues that students who attend large schools may feel isolated and alienated, leading them to escape by not attending. Economic influences include poverty, child employment, and household food insecurity, which create competing demands on children's time and energy. Student variables encompass individual attitudes toward education, peer influences, academic self-concept, and mental health challenges. The consequences of truancy are extensive: in the short term, truancy predicts maladjustment, poor academic performance, school dropout, substance abuse, and teenage pregnancy; in the long term, it serves as a predictor of adult criminality, unemployment, and social marginalization (Henry, 2007; Reid, 2006).

Truancy in the Ghanaian Context

In Ghana, the establishment of various committees to review educational policies annually indicates the priority successive governments have placed on finding lasting solutions to persistent educational challenges, including truancy (Afful-Broni, 2010). The Free Compulsory Universal Basic Education (FCUBE) programme, launched under the 1992 Constitution, stipulates that the government shall provide educational facilities at all levels and in all regions of Ghana, making those facilities available to all citizens (Government of Ghana, 1992). Various complementary initiatives have followed, including the School Feeding Programme (launched 2005), provision of free school uniforms and textbooks under the capitation grant scheme, and the establishment of the Girl Child Education Unit within the Ghana Education Service to address gender disparities in enrollment and retention.

Despite these policy interventions, truancy remains a critical problem across Ghanaian basic schools. Ministry of Education (2011) statistics reveal that truancy is widespread and continuously increasing at an alarming rate across all regions, with 2008 and 2009 data indicating that one-fifth of enrolled pupils miss classes at the beginning of every academic year. O'Keeffe (1981) identifies two types of truancy relevant to the Ghanaian context: blanket truancy, where pupils stay completely away from school, and post-registration truancy, where pupils initially register as present only to abscond during subsequent lessons. Both forms have been documented in coastal fishing communities like Mankoadze, where children often attend morning assembly to avoid being marked absent but disappear during break or afternoon sessions to engage in fishing or market trading activities.

A study using the 2012 Global School-based Health Survey found a truancy prevalence of 31% among Ghanaian adolescents, with higher rates among those experiencing hunger at school, substance use, and peer violence (Adolescent Health Research Group, 2012). This finding underscores the intersectionality of truancy with other social determinants including poverty, food insecurity, and community safety. The persistence of truancy in Ghanaian basic schools represents not merely an educational challenge but a significant constraint on national development. As Woodland and Mazur (2019) argue, the primary goal of education is to generate individuals who will be productive members of society, while Faggian et al. (2019) demonstrate that a country's economic growth is proportional to its level of educational development. In this context, chronic absenteeism threatens both individual life chances and national human capital accumulation, making effective interventions economically imperative.

Theatre for Development as Response to Educational Challenges

In recent years, various Ghanaian university-based theatre departments, non-governmental organizations, and community-based organizations have experimented with Theatre for Development projects addressing educational issues including child labor, teenage pregnancy, sanitation, and civic participation. While these initiatives remain dispersed and under-documented in the scholarly literature, they demonstrate that when young people and adults co-devise performances mirroring their everyday experiences, spectators recognize themselves and feel compelled to respond (Asante & Yirenkyi, 2020). Post-performance discussions following such presentations frequently lead to concrete commitments ranging from adjustments in household chores to changes in school disciplinary practices.

Breed (2002) argues that TfD functions as an equal opportunity to access and distill information, working with communities to create a self-sustaining tool for discourse and from that discourse to affect policy (p. 23). This conceptualization aligns with the community-school partnership model proposed in this study, which positions TfD not as a one-off intervention but as a sustained mechanism for ongoing dialogue and collective problem-solving between educational institutions and their surrounding communities. The model builds on participatory action research principles (Kemmis et al., 2014) and draws on Freire's (1970) concept of conscientization—the process through which communities develop critical awareness of their social reality and their capacity to transform it.

The theoretical mechanisms through which TfD generates behavioral change can be understood through three interrelated processes. First, dramatization makes abstract social problems concrete and emotionally resonant, allowing participants to see systemic patterns rather than individual failures. Second, the protective distance of fiction creates psychological safety for exploring sensitive topics—parents can critique fictional characters

without directly confronting their own similar behaviors, though the parallel prompts self-reflection. Third, the rehearsal function of forum theatre enables communities to practice new responses to familiar dilemmas, building both skills and confidence for real-world application. These mechanisms distinguish TfD from conventional health education or awareness campaigns that rely primarily on information transmission rather than experiential learning and collective action.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

Research Design and Philosophical Orientation

This study employed a qualitative-dominant mixed-methods design grounded in participatory action research (PAR) principles (Kemmis et al., 2014). PAR is particularly appropriate for this study because it dissolves the conventional boundary between researcher and researched, positioning community members as co-investigators who participate in framing research questions, gathering and analyzing data, and implementing and evaluating responses (Bradbury, 2008). The design integrated qualitative methods—semi-structured interviews, focus group discussions, participatory workshops, direct observation, and documentary analysis—with quantitative attendance tracking to triangulate findings and provide both depth of understanding and measurable outcomes.

The philosophical orientation draws on critical pedagogy (Freire, 1970) and constructivist epistemology, which posits that knowledge is socially constructed through dialogue and that meaningful change emerges from communities' critical reflection on their own realities. The iterative, cyclical structure of the research process—in which each phase of inquiry informed subsequent phases—reflects the reflexive learning model central to both PAR and TfD.

Study Site and Contextual Background

The study was conducted in Gomoa Mankoadze, a coastal fishing community in the Gomoa West District, Central Region of Ghana, located approximately 17.9 kilometers from Winneba township. According to the 2021 Ghana Population and Housing Census, the community has a population of approximately 8,247 (Ghana Statistical Service, 2022), with fishing accounting for approximately 72% of household livelihoods, supplemented by petty trading (18%) and farming (10%). The principal educational institution in the community is the Mankoadze Methodist D.A. Community School, a public school established in 1983 offering education from Kindergarten through Junior High School. The school had a total enrollment of 487 pupils as of January 2024, with 246 pupils in the Basic 4–6 cohort that became the focus of this intervention.

Sampling Strategy and Participant Recruitment

Purposive and stratified sampling techniques were employed to ensure representation across stakeholder groups. The study engaged 147 active participants distributed as follows: Basic 4–6 pupils (n=68, 38 girls and 30 boys, ages 9–15), selected through teacher nomination and voluntary enrollment to include both high-attenders and chronic absentees; teachers and school administrators (n=12, including the headteacher, assistant headteacher, and 10 classroom teachers); parents and guardians (n=42, recruited through PTA networks with deliberate inclusion of single mothers, fishermen, and market traders); community elders and opinion leaders (n=15, including traditional authorities, religious leaders, and assembly representatives); and existing task force members (n=10). Additionally, attendance data were tracked for the entire Basic 4–6 cohort (N=246) to assess intervention effects.

Informed consent was secured through a three-tiered process; community-level consent was obtained through courtesy calls to chiefs and elders; institutional consent was secured from the school's management committee and PTA executive; and individual consent was obtained from adult participants through written forms and from pupils through parental consent forms supplemented by child assent procedures. All consent materials were provided in both English and Fante, with verbal explanation provided for participants with limited literacy.

Data Collection Methods

Data collection occurred from February through September 2024 and employed multiple methods to ensure triangulation:

Semi-structured interviews (n=34) were conducted with key informants including the headteacher, 6 teachers, 8 parents, 6 community elders, 4 task force members, 3 traditional authorities, 2 clinic staff, 3 PTA executives, and 2 market queens. Interview protocols addressed participants' experiences with and perceptions of truancy, previous intervention attempts, seasonal livelihood patterns, and suggestions for sustainable solutions. Interviews lasted 35–90 minutes, were conducted in Fante or English based on participant preference, audio-recorded with permission, and transcribed verbatim.

Focus group discussions (n=8, with 6–12 participants each) were conducted separately with pupils (2 groups segregated by gender), teachers (1 group), parents (3 groups: mothers, fathers, and mixed), and community elders (2 groups). Focus groups explored collective narratives around schooling, household economic pressures, disciplinary practices, and community responsibility. Sessions lasted 60–120 minutes and employed participatory visual methods including timeline construction, problem trees, and seasonal calendars to enhance engagement.

Participatory workshops (n=12) employed theatre games, improvisation exercises, storytelling circles, drawing activities, and role-play to elicit experiential data that might not emerge through conventional interviews. These workshops served both diagnostic and interventional functions, simultaneously generating data and building capacity for collective action.

Direct observation documented school routines, morning assemblies, classroom interactions, break-time behaviors, community livelihood activities, and patterns of child labor during fishing seasons. Field notes were recorded using a structured observation protocol addressing physical environment, social interactions, temporal patterns, and researcher reflexivity. Over 140 hours of observation were conducted across school and community settings.

Documentary analysis examined school attendance registers for January–September 2024, PTA meeting minutes from 2022–2024, task force activity logs, and district education office reports. Attendance registers provided daily presence/absence data for all 246 Basic 4–6 pupils, disaggregated by grade level, gender, and day of the week.

Data Analysis Procedures

Qualitative data from interviews, focus groups, and field notes were analyzed using reflexive thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Interview and focus group recordings were transcribed verbatim in their original language (Fante or English), with Fante transcripts subsequently translated to English by a bilingual research assistant. Transcripts were imported into NVivo 14 qualitative analysis software for systematic coding. The analytical process followed six phases: familiarization through repeated reading of transcripts; initial coding conducted independently by the lead researcher and a research assistant, with attention to both semantic and latent meanings; collation of codes into candidate themes through iterative grouping; review and refinement of themes against coded extracts and the entire dataset; definition and naming of themes with attention to their relationships and boundaries; and production of the analytical narrative integrating themes with illustrative quotations.

Inter-coder reliability was assessed through independent coding of 25% of transcripts (n=9) by both coders, yielding a Cohen's kappa of 0.78, indicating substantial agreement. Discrepancies were resolved through discussion and consensus. Member checking was conducted by sharing preliminary themes with 12 key informants (3 teachers, 4 parents, 3 elders, 2 pupils) who confirmed the resonance of findings with their lived experiences. Quantitative attendance data were analyzed using paired-samples t-tests to compare pre-intervention (January 2024) and post-intervention (August–September 2024) attendance rates, with effect sizes calculated using Cohen's d. All quantitative analyses were conducted using SPSS version 28.

Ethical Considerations

Beyond institutional ethical approval and informed consent procedures, several additional safeguards were implemented. Confidentiality was maintained through use of pseudonyms for all individual participants and secure storage of identifiable data. Given the sensitive nature of discussions around household poverty, child labor, and corporal punishment, the research team established referral pathways to district social welfare services for cases requiring intervention. Participants received no financial incentives to avoid coercion, though refreshments were provided during workshops and transport reimbursement was offered for those traveling from distant neighborhoods. The TfD intervention itself was designed to avoid extraction of community labor: performances and workshops were scheduled at times negotiated with participants to minimize disruption to livelihoods, and the project committed to sharing findings with the community through accessible forums rather than solely through academic publications.

Implementation Of the Theatre for Development Intervention

The Theatre for Development intervention was implemented through an eight-phase participatory cycle designed to embed school attendance challenges within wider community life and to generate locally owned responses. Each phase is detailed below with attention to activities, participant roles, and emergent insights.

Phase 1: Community Entry and Trust Building (February 2024)

The intervention commenced with sustained community entry activities aimed at building rapport and securing social legitimacy. Courtesy visits following customary protocols were paid to the Gomoa Mankoadze chief, queen mother, school authorities, PTA executives, assembly member, and religious leaders. These engagements, conducted primarily in Fante, explained the project's participatory orientation and sought permission to conduct research and performance activities. Facilitators attended three PTA meetings, four community durbars, and multiple informal gatherings at fishing landing sites and market spaces, allowing observation of everyday schooling routines, livelihood cycles, and patterns of pupil absence. Early identification of the seasonal baka pae fishing period (May–June) as a critical attendance pressure point emerged from these observations and informed subsequent scheduling decisions.

Phase 2: Exploratory Workshops (March 2024)

Exploratory workshops functioned as diagnostic spaces for eliciting participants' lived experiences of schooling and absenteeism. Separate sessions were initially organized for pupils (2 workshops, n=35), parents and guardians (2 workshops, n=28), and teachers (1 workshop, n=12) to minimize power imbalances and encourage open expression. Through theatre games adapted from Boal's arsenal—including image theatre where participants created frozen tableaux representing truancy scenarios—participants articulated multiple drivers of absenteeism. Pupils' workshops revealed fear of corporal punishment as a significant deterrent, with 23 of 35 child participants describing experiences of being caned for late arrival or incomplete homework, leading some to avoid school entirely rather than face punishment. Parents' workshops surfaced the economic imperative of the fishing economy, with several fathers explicitly stating that during peak fishing season, a child's labor at sea or in fish processing generates more immediate household value than their presence in the classroom.

Teachers' workshops identified institutional frustrations: large class sizes (averaging 41 pupils per class), inadequate teaching materials, and the perception that parental indifference undermines their efforts. The absence of a school feeding program emerged across all stakeholder groups as a structural driver of post-lunch absenteeism, as children who returned home for midday meals frequently did not return due to distance (some living 2-3 kilometers from school), domestic demands, or simple lack of motivation without food incentive.

Figure 1 Story Harvesting/rehearsal

Phase 3: Story Harvesting (April 2024)

Stories emerging from exploratory workshops were deepened through storytelling circles, re-enactments of everyday scenarios, proverb-sharing sessions, and small-group improvisations. Narratives were anonymized and framed as collective social experiences rather than individual failings to reduce stigma and encourage broader ownership. A particularly resonant composite character emerged: Atta, a 13-year-old boy caught between his uncle's fishing debts (which obligate him to work at sea to help repay them) and the tedium and fear he experiences at school. This character crystallized the dual pressure—economic extraction and educational alienation—sustaining truancy among vulnerable pupils. Other composite characters developed included Ama Ntroba (a mother who routinely removes her daughter from class for market errands, not recognizing the academic consequences), Agya Ntow (a father who sees little value in formal education given his own success as an uneducated fisherman), and Madam Mercy (a teacher whose reliance on corporal punishment stems from frustration and lack of alternative disciplinary strategies).

Phase 4: Collective Script Devising (May 2024)

Community participants, particularly youth and pupils, collaborated with facilitators to convert harvested stories into short dramatic scenes through intensive improvisation workshops. The resulting script, written bilingually in English and Fante, featured fourteen characters drawn from Mankoadze archetypes and was structured into five scenes tracing the truancy problem from immediate manifestations through institutional responses to community resolution. Scene 1 portrayed pupils Ella, Philip, and Hilda planning to skip afternoon classes for the lagoon harvest while simultaneously showing Ama Ntroba instructing her daughter Adwoa to come home at break time to help sell fish. Scene 2 depicted children at the lagoon encountering Atta, who reveals he has been absent for three weeks due to his uncle's fishing obligations and his fear of the teacher's cane. Scene 3 showed community elder Abusuapanyin Kofi overhearing the children's conversation and reporting to the headmistress. Scene 4 portrayed a staff meeting in which teachers catalogue the multiple causes of absenteeism—from household poverty to inadequate school feeding to parental extraction of children—while grappling with their own complicity in fear-based discipline. Scene 5 culminated in a PTA meeting where parents, teachers, and elders negotiate collective solutions, with Ama Ntroba offering a public apology for her role in her daughter's truancy and committing to behavioral change. Local performance idioms including call-and-response songs, proverbs embedded in dialogue, and physical comedy were integrated to enhance cultural resonance and audience engagement.

Phase 5: Forum Performances (June–July 2024)

Four public forum performances were staged in June and July 2024: two in the school compound (June 15 and 22) targeting pupils and teachers during school hours, and two in the community center (July 6 and 13) scheduled for Saturday afternoons to ensure parental and elder attendance. Total audience across the four performances numbered approximately 380 people (estimated from attendance logs: 140 pupils, 95 parents, 78 community

members, 34 teachers and education officials, 33 observers from neighboring communities). Performances were conducted primarily in Fante with selective English for formal speeches by authority figures, maintaining linguistic accessibility.

Consistent with Boal's forum theatre methodology, each scene was performed once in full, after which the joker (lead facilitator) invited audience members to interrupt the action, replace characters, and propose alternative courses of action. At the July 6 performance, a parent from the audience replaced Ama Ntroba in Scene 1 and demonstrated an alternative approach: instead of calling her daughter home, she sent the daughter to school with packed food and pocket money, thereby eliminating the need to return home at lunchtime. At the July 13 performance, a teacher replaced Madam Mercy and modeled a non-punitive response to late arrival, asking the pupil about the reason for lateness rather than immediately administering corporal punishment. These interventions transformed spectators into active problem-solvers, collectively testing new behaviors and responsibilities. Audience engagement was notably high, with 47 documented interventions across the four performances, including 12 by pupils, 18 by parents, 11 by teachers, and 6 by community elders.

Figure 2. Forum Performance

Phase 6: Post-Performance Dialogues (June–July 2024)

Immediately following each performance, structured dialogue sessions were facilitated to consolidate learning and shift from dramatization to collective analysis and action planning. The post-performance dialogue format employed a carefully sequenced process: initial reactions and emotional responses were invited first, allowing participants to express what moved or troubled them; analytical questions followed, prompting participants to

identify the underlying causes of the depicted conflicts; finally, solution-oriented discussion generated concrete proposals for addressing truancy at household, school, and community levels.

Mixed-stakeholder groups were deliberately formed to prevent blame narratives and promote shared accountability. Small group discussions (8-12 participants including pupils, parents, teachers, and elders) were facilitated before reporting back to the plenary, ensuring that less vocal participants—particularly children and women—had space to articulate their perspectives before the larger public forum. Facilitators employed visual recording techniques including flip charts and illustrated problem trees to make discussion outcomes visible and collectively owned.

A particularly significant moment occurred during the July 6 dialogue when a mother in the audience spontaneously stood and, echoing the fictional Ama Ntroba's apology in Scene 5, publicly acknowledged that she had been routinely removing her daughter from school to help with fish processing without recognizing the long-term academic consequences. Her statement catalyzed similar disclosures from three other parents and prompted a collective discussion about the tension between immediate economic survival and long-term educational investment. This kind of performative resonance—where fictional scenarios catalyze real-life confession and commitment—represents TfD at its most transformative (Boal, 1979; Freire, 1970). Field notes document 23 such moments of public commitment across the four performances, including teachers pledging to reduce corporal punishment, fathers committing to ensuring children complete homework before engaging in fishing activities, and community elders promising to revitalize the attendance monitoring task force.

Figure 3 Post Performance Discussion

Phase 7: Action Planning (July 2024)

The dialogue sessions culminated in three intensive action-planning workshops (July 20, 23, and 27) in which school and community representatives co-designed concrete, time-bound interventions to address the identified drivers of truancy. The workshops employed participatory planning tools including logical frameworks, responsibility matrices, and timeline charts to ensure clarity about what would be done, by whom, and by when. The following actions were agreed upon through consensus and formally documented in a Community-School Attendance Compact signed by 47 stakeholders including the school headteacher, PTA chair, assembly member, traditional authorities, and representatives from parent, teacher, and pupil constituencies:

1. Reconstitution of the Community Attendance Monitoring Task Force. The previously ineffective task force was reconstituted with 15 members (expanded from the original 10) including representation from fishermen, market women, youth groups, and religious organizations. Clear mandates were established: conduct daily morning patrols during school hours, engage parents of absent children through home visits within 24 hours of unexplained absence, document chronic absenteeism patterns, and report monthly to the PTA. Critically, the

reconstituted task force was empowered not to administer punishment but to engage in supportive dialogue with families, addressing underlying barriers to attendance.

2. Parent-School Covenant on Unauthorized Class Extraction. Parents collectively committed to cease the practice of calling children out of class during school hours for errands, market trading, or fishing activities. A formal protocol was established: any parent needing a child during school hours must first seek permission from the headteacher, stating the reason and expected duration of absence. The school, in turn, committed to consider legitimate emergency requests sympathetically while discouraging routine interruptions to learning time.

3. Food Security Initiative. Recognizing that post-lunch absenteeism was driven partly by children returning home to eat and not coming back, the PTA mobilized parents to commit to sending children to school with packed lunch or pocket money for food purchase from local vendors. For families unable to afford this, a community food pool was established through which better-off families contributed rice, fish, or small cash donations to ensure vulnerable children had access to midday meals.

4. Establishment of a Reading and Academic Support Club. To address the academic deficits accumulated through chronic absenteeism, a volunteer-led reading club was established meeting three afternoons per week (Monday, Wednesday, Friday, 3:30-5:00 PM). The club, coordinated by two teachers and staffed by five community volunteers including retired teachers and university students home on vacation, provided remedial support in literacy and numeracy for pupils who had fallen behind due to frequent absence. By September 2024, 37 pupils were regularly attending the club.

5. School-Level Disciplinary Reform. Teachers collectively committed to reducing reliance on corporal punishment and experimenting with alternative disciplinary approaches. A three-tiered response system was adopted: first offense receives verbal counseling and inquiry into underlying causes of lateness or absence; second offense involves parental notification and joint problem-solving; only persistent, willful violations result in punitive consequences, and even then corporal punishment is replaced with alternative sanctions such as community service within the school compound or Saturday morning counseling sessions.

6. Early Warning System for Chronic Absenteeism. An attendance tracking mechanism was established whereby the school identifies pupils with three or more unexplained absences within a two-week period and immediately initiates contact with parents through the task force. This early identification allows intervention before absenteeism patterns become entrenched, addressing problems while they remain manageable rather than waiting until pupils have effectively dropped out.

Phase 8: Follow-Up Monitoring and Reflection (August–September 2024)

Follow-up monitoring was conducted through four site visits (August 5, August 19, September 2, and September 16) aimed at assessing implementation fidelity, documenting emerging challenges, and facilitating adaptive learning. The monitoring process employed multiple data sources: review of school attendance registers comparing August-September 2024 rates to January 2024 baseline; observation of task force patrols and home visits; interviews with 12 key informants including the headteacher, task force coordinator, PTA chair, and selected parents and pupils; and facilitated reflection workshops with teachers (August 12) and community stakeholders (September 9).

Quantitative attendance data revealed sustained improvement: mean daily attendance in August was 86.9% and in September was 88.2%, compared to the January baseline of 68.4%. These gains persisted even during the latter part of the fishing season, suggesting that the intervention had successfully mitigated the seasonal attendance dip that previously characterized this period. Disaggregation by day of week showed that Friday attendance—historically the weakest day—improved from 62.1% in January to 85.4% in September, indicating that the food security initiative and parent-school covenant were having measurable effects.

Qualitative monitoring revealed mixed implementation fidelity. The task force was observed to be active and visible, conducting morning patrols and engaging in home visits, though coordinators reported that some families remained resistant to dialogue. The reading club was thriving with strong pupil enthusiasm, though teacher-

volunteers expressed concern about sustainability without external support once the initial project momentum dissipated. The food security initiative showed variable implementation: approximately 60% of families were consistently sending children with food or money, representing substantial improvement but still leaving 40% of pupils vulnerable to post-lunch absenteeism.

Where momentum showed signs of declining—particularly in maintaining the food pool for vulnerable families—facilitators conducted refresher mini-performances and community dialogues to re-ignite commitment. For example, when the food pool contributions declined in late August, a 20-minute scene depicting the consequences of hunger on pupils' ability to concentrate in class was performed at a PTA meeting, prompting renewed pledges from 12 families. This adaptive use of performance as an ongoing mobilization tool, rather than a one-time event, proved critical to sustaining intervention effects and reflects the iterative, reflexive character of effective TfD practice.

FINDINGS

Quantitative Attendance Outcomes

Time Period	Mean Attendance %	SD	N
Pre-intervention (January 2024)	68.4%	12.3	246
Post-intervention (Aug-Sept 2024)	87.6%	8.7	246
Change	**+19.2 percentage points**		

Table 1: Pre- and Post-Intervention Attendance Rates

A paired-samples t-test revealed that the increase in attendance from pre-intervention (M=68.4%, SD=12.3) to post-intervention (M=87.6%, SD=8.7) was statistically significant, $t(245)=12.34$, $p<.001$, representing a large effect size (Cohen's $d=1.82$). This 19.2 percentage point improvement translates to an average of 47 additional pupils present daily in the Basic 4–6 cohort. Disaggregation by gender showed slightly stronger gains among girls (pre: 65.2%, post: 89.1%, +23.9 points) compared to boys (pre: 71.1%, post: 86.3%, +15.2 points), though both were statistically significant. Weekly attendance patterns showed sustained improvement across all five school days, including Fridays which had been particularly vulnerable to absenteeism in the pre-intervention period.

Qualitative Findings: Drivers of Truancy

Thematic analysis of interview and focus group data identified five interconnected drivers of truancy in Mankoadze, presented below with illustrative quotations from participants.

Seasonal Fishing Economy Pressures

The dominant theme across all stakeholder groups was the powerful economic pull of the fishing calendar, particularly during the baka pae lagoon harvest season (May–June). Parents explicitly articulated a rational calculation in which children's immediate labor value exceeded the perceived long-term returns of education. As one father stated during a focus group:

When the fish are plenty, every hand is needed. If my son is in school while the catch is good, I am losing money that day. Education is for the future, but we must eat today. [Father, age 43, fisherman, Focus Group 2]

This theme was corroborated by teacher observations and attendance register data, which showed sharp declines in May–June corresponding to the fishing season. The economic imperative was compounded by the practice of fish-based credit arrangements in which families incur debts to net owners or boat captains, with children's labor

serving as partial repayment—precisely the situation depicted through the character of Atta in the forum theatre performance.

Fear-Based Disciplinary Practices

Pupils across all focus groups identified corporal punishment and harsh disciplinary practices as significant deterrents to school attendance. A 12-year-old girl explained:

If you are late or you don't bring your homework, Madam will cane you in front of the whole class. Sometimes it is better to not come at all than to face the cane. If you stay away one day, you are afraid to come the next day because the punishment will be even worse. [Pupil, age 12, female, Focus Group 1]

This finding reveals a self-reinforcing cycle: punishment intended to deter absence paradoxically generates further absence by creating fear and shame. Teachers acknowledged this dynamic but expressed frustration about the lack of alternative disciplinary tools given large class sizes and limited administrative support.

Household Food Insecurity and Post-Lunch Absenteeism

The absence of a school feeding program emerged as a structural driver of post-lunch absenteeism across all data sources. Children who returned home at midday for their main meal—often traveling 2-3 kilometers on foot—frequently did not return to school for afternoon sessions. Teachers estimated that post-lunch attendance was typically 15-25 percentage points lower than morning attendance. A teacher explained:

The children are hungry. They cannot concentrate in the morning, and by 11 o'clock they are desperate to go home to eat. Once they leave, many do not come back. The distance is far, they become tired after eating, or their mothers give them work to do. Without food at school, we cannot keep them here all day. [Teacher, female, 8 years experience, Interview 12]

This finding was triangulated with attendance register data showing consistent afternoon attendance deficits, and with pupils' own accounts describing hunger as a primary motivator for leaving school. The structural nature of this driver—rooted in national policy decisions about school feeding rather than individual household or school failures—underscores the need for multi-level intervention addressing both local practices and broader policy environments.

Parental Ambivalence Toward Formal Education

A significant subset of parents, particularly fathers engaged in fishing, expressed skepticism about the value of formal education relative to traditional livelihood skills. This ambivalence was not rooted in ignorance or indifference but rather in rational economic calculation informed by observation of unemployed secondary school graduates and successful uneducated fishermen in the community. A father articulated this perspective:

I did not go to school and I have three boats. My neighbor finished secondary school and he cannot find work, so now he works for me as a crew member. What has school done for him? I want my son to learn fishing, to learn the sea, to learn business. These are skills that will feed him. The school does not teach these things. [Father, age 38, boat owner, Focus Group 3]

This theme challenges deficit narratives that frame parental non-compliance simply as ignorance requiring education. Instead, it reveals a fundamental misalignment between the curriculum offered by formal schooling and the livelihood realities of fishing communities, suggesting that interventions must address not only parental attitudes but also the relevance and responsiveness of educational content to local contexts. Several parents proposed that if schools incorporated practical skills training—including sea safety, fish processing techniques, small business management, and environmental conservation—they would see greater value in their children's attendance.

Weak Enforcement Mechanisms and Institutional Legitimacy Deficits

Prior to the TfD intervention, a community task force had been established in 2019 to monitor school attendance, but by 2024 it had become largely ineffective. Task force members described encountering parental hostility when attempting to enforce attendance, with several reporting verbal abuse and, in two documented cases, physical confrontation when they attempted to bring truant children to school. A task force member explained:

We tried to do our work, but some parents attacked us. They said, 'Who are you to tell me what to do with my child?' We had no power, no backing from the chief or the assembly. We became discouraged and stopped trying. [Task force member, male, age 52, Interview 8]

This finding illustrates that institutional mechanisms lacking social legitimacy—that is, acceptance by the community as rightful and authoritative—cannot function effectively regardless of their formal mandate. The task force's weakness stemmed not from insufficient legal authority but from insufficient social recognition of that authority. The TfD intervention addressed this deficit by using participatory processes to collectively reaffirm the task force's mandate, thereby rebuilding its social legitimacy through community ownership rather than external imposition.

Forum Theatre as a Catalytic Mechanism

Analysis of field notes from the four forum performances and subsequent dialogues reveals that forum theatre functioned as the most catalytic single element of the intervention, creating conditions for attitudinal and behavioral shifts that conventional meetings or awareness campaigns had failed to produce. Three specific mechanisms can be identified:

Recognition and identification. Audience members across all stakeholder groups reported seeing themselves or their neighbors in the characters, creating emotional resonance and personal investment in the depicted conflicts. A mother stated: When I saw Ama Ntroba calling her daughter from class, I saw myself. I realized I have been doing the same thing. This recognition transformed truancy from an abstract social problem into a personally relevant dilemma requiring individual response.

Safe rehearsal of alternatives. The forum structure allowed participants to experiment with different responses to familiar dilemmas without real-world consequences. When a teacher replaced the punitive Madam Mercy character and demonstrated a counseling-based approach to late arrival, other teachers in the audience saw a viable alternative modeled in practice rather than merely described in theory. This experiential learning proved more persuasive than didactic instruction.

Collective reframing from blame to shared responsibility. By depicting truancy as produced by interactions among pupils, parents, teachers, and economic structures—rather than locating fault in any single actor—the performances disrupted blame narratives and opened space for collaborative problem-solving. Post-performance dialogues frequently featured statements like we are all responsible and we must all change together, indicating successful reframing from individual deviance to collective challenge.

DISCUSSION

This section interprets the study's findings in relation to existing literature on truancy, Theatre for Development, and community-school partnerships, with particular attention to the theoretical and practical implications of the observed outcomes.

Truancy as a Socially Embedded Phenomenon

The findings strongly support conceptualizing truancy not as individual deviance but as a socially embedded phenomenon produced by the intersection of economic structures, cultural norms, institutional practices, and household survival strategies. This understanding aligns with Zhang et al.'s (2007) multi-factorial framework identifying family, school, economic, and student variables, but extends it by demonstrating how these factors

interact dynamically in specific local contexts. In Mankoadze, the fishing economy creates seasonal labor demands that pull children from school; this economic pressure is mediated by cultural norms about childhood, work, and the value of formal education; these norms shape parental decisions about authorizing or compelling absence; parental extraction of children then undermines teachers' authority and morale; and teacher frustration manifests as punitive discipline, which further alienates pupils. Each factor amplifies others in a self-reinforcing cycle that cannot be interrupted by targeting any single point. The implication is that effective interventions must be systems-oriented, addressing multiple leverage points simultaneously and recognizing truancy as symptomatic of broader social arrangements rather than reducible to individual pathology.

Participatory Performance as a Transformation Mechanism

The study provides empirical support for Boal's (1979) and Freire's (1970) theoretical claims about the transformative potential of participatory performance. Three mechanisms deserve particular attention:

First, conscientization through dramatization. Freire (1970) argued that oppressed communities must develop critical consciousness of the social forces shaping their circumstances before they can act to transform them. The TfD process in Mankoadze facilitated this conscientization by making visible—through dramatic representation—the systemic patterns underlying individual experiences of truancy. When parents watched the character of Agya Ntow justify keeping his son from school to work on his boat, they saw not an isolated individual choice but a pattern reproduced across households in response to economic pressures and cultural norms about childhood labor. This shift from seeing truancy as individual failing to recognizing it as socially produced opened conceptual space for collective rather than merely individual solutions.

Second, rehearsal as capacity-building. Boal's concept of spect-actors who rehearse reality suggests that performance can build community capacity for social change by allowing people to practice new behaviors in low-risk contexts before implementing them in actual situations (Boal, 1979). The Mankoadze intervention provided evidence for this mechanism: when a parent replaced Ama Ntroba in the forum theatre and demonstrated an alternative approach (sending the child with packed lunch rather than calling her home), she was not merely proposing an idea but actually modeling the behavior, allowing other parents to witness its viability. Post-intervention interviews revealed that several parents explicitly referenced these modeled alternatives when explaining their own changed practices, suggesting that the rehearsal function directly influenced real-world behavior.

Third, fiction as a safe space for self-critique. The protective distance of fictional representation allowed participants to engage in self-critique that might be psychologically threatening in direct confrontation. Parents could recognize themselves in characters' behaviors and commit to change without experiencing the shame of public accusation. This finding extends Prentki and Preston's (2009) argument that TfD creates liminal spaces—threshold zones between reality and fiction—where communities can safely explore difficult truths. The significance is methodological: interventions seeking behavioral change on sensitive topics may be more effective when they employ indirect, metaphorical communication rather than direct confrontation or didactic instruction.

Institutional Anchoring and Sustainability

A critical finding is that the TfD intervention's effectiveness was substantially enhanced by anchoring it within existing institutional structures—the school, PTA, and community task force—rather than creating parallel or external mechanisms. This institutional embeddedness addresses a common critique of TfD practice: that it often generates enthusiasm and commitment during facilitated events but fails to produce sustained change because momentum dissipates once external facilitators depart (Mda, 1993). By reconstituting the task force, formalizing the parent-school covenant through PTA structures, and establishing the reading club as a school-integrated program, the intervention created institutional carriers for ongoing implementation that did not depend on continued external presence. The implication for TfD practice is that facilitators should prioritize strengthening existing community institutions rather than establishing new ones, thereby increasing the likelihood that gains will persist beyond the intervention period.

The Community-School Partnership Model

Based on the Mankoadze experience, this study proposes a Community-School Partnership Model for truancy reduction grounded in five integrative principles:

Principle 1: *Shared Diagnosis Through Participatory Inquiry***.** Truancy cannot be meaningfully addressed unless all stakeholders—pupils, parents, teachers, and community leaders—participate in identifying its causes and manifestations. The diagnostic phase must disaggregate stakeholder groups initially to enable safe expression before bringing findings into collective discussion, thereby producing comprehensive understanding that integrates multiple perspectives. Methodologically, this requires moving beyond surveys or expert assessment to employ participatory tools including theatre games, drawing activities, storytelling circles, and focus groups that prioritize experiential knowledge over statistical abstraction.

Principle 2: *Cultural Embeddedness and Local Ownership.* Interventions must be recognized as emerging from within the community rather than being imposed from outside. This requires using local languages, familiar performance conventions, community-specific scenarios, and characters drawn from local archetypes. In Mankoadze, the use of Fante language, incorporation of fishing-related proverbs and songs, and grounding of dramatic scenarios in recognizable community experiences ensured that the intervention was experienced as culturally owned rather than externally imposed. This cultural legitimacy proved foundational to the community's willingness to engage critically with the performances and take ownership of resulting action plans.

Principle 3: *Institutional Anchoring Within Existing Structures***.** Rather than creating parallel or external mechanisms, interventions should strengthen and work through existing community and school institutions—PTAs, school management committees, community task forces, traditional authorities. This institutional embeddedness reduces dependency on external facilitators, increases likelihood of sustainability, and aligns interventions with established governance structures. In practice, this means that TfD processes should culminate in action plans implemented through existing institutions rather than creating new organizations that may lack social legitimacy or resources for sustained operation.

Principle 4*: Multi-Stakeholder Accountability and Shared Responsibility***.** Effective truancy reduction requires distributing responsibility across all stakeholder groups rather than locating it solely in schools or individual pupils. The forum theatre and post-performance dialogue processes must be deliberately designed to prevent blame narratives and instead cultivate recognition that pupils, parents, teachers, and community structures all contribute to the problem and must all participate in solutions. This shift from individual to collective accountability represents TfD's most important contribution to educational governance, transforming truancy from a disciplinary problem requiring punishment to a shared challenge requiring coordinated action.

Principle 5: *Iterative Monitoring and Adaptive Management***.** Social change is not a one-time event but an ongoing process requiring sustained facilitation and periodic renewal of community commitment. The follow-up monitoring phase should not merely assess whether initial commitments were kept but should employ adaptive management principles—using monitoring data to identify emerging challenges, facilitating refresher dialogues when momentum declines, and adjusting strategies based on implementation learning. The use of refresher performances in Mankoadze when food pool contributions declined demonstrates this iterative approach, treating TfD not as a time-limited intervention but as an ongoing practice of community mobilization and reflection.

Addressing the Limitations: Threats to Validity and Generalizability

The study's limitations warrant careful consideration in interpreting the observed attendance improvements. The absence of a control group means that alternative explanations for the 19.2 percentage point increase cannot be definitively ruled out. Possible confounding factors may include include the Hawthorne effect, whereby heightened attention and observation temporarily motivate behavioral change; concurrent district-level education initiatives that may have independently influenced attendance; seasonal weather variations that affected fishing patterns and thus labor demands on children; or natural maturation effects as pupils progress through school grades.

Several features of the research design and findings, however, provide partial reassurance about causal attribution. First, the timing of the intervention and the observed pattern of change: attendance improvements emerged specifically following the forum performances and action planning workshops, rather than showing gradual increase throughout the study period. Second, the qualitative data documenting explicit connections between the intervention and behavioral change: parents, teachers, and pupils repeatedly cited the performances and post-performance commitments when explaining changed practices. Third, the specificity of changes to the targeted mechanisms: the most substantial improvements occurred in precisely those areas addressed by action plans (Friday attendance, post-lunch return rates, task force effectiveness), rather than showing diffuse improvement across all domains.

Nevertheless, the quasi-experimental design limits confidence in causal claims. Future research should employ more rigorous designs including randomized controlled trials or quasi-experimental approaches with matched comparison communities, alongside longitudinal tracking to assess whether gains persist beyond the short-term follow-up period examined here. Only through such studies can the field move from promising preliminary evidence to robust conclusions about TfD's effectiveness as a truancy reduction mechanism.

Implications for Policy and Practice

The study's findings carry several implications for educational policy and TfD practice in Ghana and potentially across similar contexts in West Africa. For policymakers, the evidence suggests that participatory, culturally grounded approaches merit inclusion in the national toolkit for addressing chronic absenteeism alongside conventional enforcement mechanisms. The Ghana Education Service could pilot the Community-School Partnership Model in diverse contexts—fishing communities, farming regions, peri-urban areas, mining towns—with rigorous comparative evaluation to identify scope conditions and refine implementation protocols. For TfD practitioners, the findings underscore the importance of extended timelines, institutional anchoring, and ongoing adaptive management rather than relying on one-time workshop interventions. For schools and communities, the model offers a replicable framework adaptable to local circumstances while maintaining fidelity to core principles of shared diagnosis, cultural embeddedness, multi-stakeholder accountability, and iterative monitoring.

Limitations

This study has several methodological and contextual limitations that warrant acknowledgment.

Absence of control group. The quasi-experimental design without a comparison community limits causal attribution. While the 19.2 percentage point improvement in attendance is substantial, one cannot definitively rule out alternative explanations including concurrent district-level interventions, seasonal weather variations affecting fishing patterns, or general maturation effects. Future research should employ controlled designs comparing intervention communities with matched comparison sites.

The heightened visibility and novelty of the TfD intervention may have temporarily motivated behavior change that could decline once external attention dissipates. The eight-month timeframe, while longer than many participatory theatre projects, remains insufficient to assess long-term sustainability. Follow-up monitoring at 12, 18, and 24 months post-intervention is needed to determine whether attendance gains persist.

Mankoadze was purposively selected based on community openness to intervention and the existence of institutional infrastructure (school, PTA, task force). This may limit generalizability to communities with weaker institutional capacity or greater resistance to external facilitation. The study cannot determine whether the model would succeed in contexts lacking these enabling conditions.

Gendered power dynamics insufficiently examined. While the study disaggregated findings by gender where possible, it did not conduct deep intersectional analysis of how gender, age, and household position shaped participation in workshops and performances. Future research should employ feminist participatory action research frameworks to foreground the experiences of girls and women.

Lack of longitudinal tracking. The study does not track individual pupils over time to assess whether improved attendance translated to improved learning outcomes, grade progression, or eventual secondary school enrollment. Future research should link attendance data to academic performance indicators and conduct longitudinal cohort tracking.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

This study set out to investigate how Theatre for Development, implemented through community-school partnerships, could address school truancy in a Ghanaian coastal fishing community. The findings demonstrate that a structured, participatory intervention grounded in forum theatre methodologies can generate measurable improvements in school attendance while simultaneously strengthening community-school relationships and institutional capacity for ongoing problem-solving. The 19.2 percentage point increase in attendance among Basic 4–6 pupils in Gomoa Mankoadze, sustained across an eight-month period including the challenging fishing season, provides preliminary evidence that culturally embedded participatory performance can catalyze behavioral change when coupled with institutional anchoring and multi-stakeholder engagement.

Beyond the quantitative outcomes, the study illuminates the mechanisms through which TfD operates: by making systemic patterns visible through dramatization, creating safe spaces for self-critique through fictional representation, enabling rehearsal of alternative behaviors, and reframing social problems from individual deviance to collective challenge. These mechanisms distinguish TfD from conventional awareness campaigns or punitive enforcement approaches, offering a pathway to change that builds on community strengths and local knowledge rather than imposing external solutions.

The proposed Community-School Partnership Model, grounded in five integrative principles—shared diagnosis, cultural embeddedness, institutional anchoring, multi-stakeholder accountability, and iterative monitoring—offers a replicable framework for TfD-based educational interventions adaptable to diverse community contexts. While the model emerged from research in a specific fishing community, its underlying principles have broader applicability to educational challenges characterized by complex interactions among household economics, cultural norms, institutional practices, and student experiences.

The study's limitations—particularly the absence of a control group and the short follow-up period—constrain confidence in causal attribution and long-term sustainability. Future research employing more rigorous quasi-experimental or randomized designs, with extended longitudinal tracking and systematic comparison across diverse community types, is essential to moving from promising preliminary evidence to robust conclusions about TfD's effectiveness. Such research should also examine cost-effectiveness relative to alternative interventions, assess whether attendance improvements translate to learning gains and educational progression, and investigate the equity dimensions of effects across gender, socioeconomic status, and other axes of social difference.

Recommendations

The Ghana Education Service should pilot the Community–School Partnership Model in at least 20 coastal and rural communities across three regions, with rigorous quasi-experimental evaluation comparing intervention sites to matched controls. Pilots should include communities with both strong and weak institutional infrastructure to test model adaptability.

Teacher training curricula should integrate modules on participatory pedagogy and non-punitive classroom management, drawing on TfD methodologies to help teachers develop alternatives to corporal punishment that maintain order while preserving pupils' dignity and agency.

Conduct longitudinal quantitative tracking linking attendance improvements to learning outcomes, grade progression, and secondary school transition rates, addressing the current study's limitation of focusing solely on attendance as an outcome variable.

In conclusion, the Gomoa Mankoadze intervention demonstrates that educational challenges such as truancy are not simply behavioral disruptions requiring disciplinary response but reflections of broader social dynamics requiring collective reflection and coordinated action. Through participatory theatre, pupils, parents, teachers, and community leaders rehearsed new relationships and responsibilities, transforming blame into shared ownership and punitive enforcement into collaborative problem-solving. In this way, Theatre for Development emerges not only as an artistic practice but as a democratic tool for reimagining educational governance, restoring trust between schools and the communities they serve, and building institutional capacity for addressing the complex social challenges that constrain educational opportunity and equity in rural Ghana and beyond.

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